

Sorghum brings rich flavor to the table

By Sharon Thompson
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Sorghum is one of fall's most delightful products.

And, undoubtedly, the best way to eat it is by drizzling it over a spoonful of butter, mixing the two together and slathering it on a hot biscuit or corn bread.

"Pure sorghum has the best flavor, full and rich, smoky, woody, sharp, salty and sweet," says Mark Sohn, Kentucky's most authoritative writer on Appalachian cooking. "I like to serve it hot over pancakes or stack cakes. And of course, I microwave it with a pinch of baking soda, as that makes it bubble up."

Sorghum also is pretty good mixed with peanut butter, added to baked beans or used to glaze ham, and it's an important ingredient in ginger snaps and some barbecue sauces.

Many people think molasses and sorghum are the same, but sorghum makers will tell you that molasses is a byproduct of making sugar and often can be a blended product, even containing as much as 20 percent Karo syrup. Sugar cane does not grow in the mountains of the South, so the syrup produced in southern Appalachia is properly called sorghum, from sorghum cane.

Kentucky and Tennessee are the leading sorghum syrup-producing states, said Fred Sauceman, who has written about the traditions of making sorghum in Volume 1 of his book series *The Place Setting: Timeless Tastes of the Mountain South, From Bright Hope to Frog Level*. Sauceman also is the author of *Home and Away*.

Arland Johnson, a member of the National Sweet Sorghum Producers and Processors Association, makes sorghum in rural Washington County, Tenn., and he has a sign at his farm that reads: "Mother Nature in a Jug."

Sorghum syrup is a natural, pure product with no additives and contains iron, calcium and potassium. Before the invention of daily vitamins, many doctors prescribed sorghum as a daily supplement for those low in these nutrients, according to the processors association.

For more than 30 years, sorghum has been celebrated at the Morgan County Sorghum Festival.

"We started out with the dogwood festival to sell crafts, but it just didn't go," Barbara Perry said. Focusing on sorghum instead "was a chance for farmers to sell their product. It turned out much better and it's grown steadily."

Members of the festival committee printed a sorghum cookbook several years ago.

"They researched old cookbooks to get recipes, but most of them said use a handful of flour, a pinch of this, put in the oven and bake. That was tough," Perry said.

The festival also proved to be an opportunity for cooks and bakers to sell their sorghum specialties. For years, Ollie McKinney, now 99, made soft molasses cookies for her church to sell at the festival.

"They were always a hit. Ollie also made hand pies, fried apple pies and stack cake for the many festival visitors," Linda Oakley said. "Ollie is known for her excellent heritage cooking skills."

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MARK CORNELISON/Mark Cornelison

A drizzle of sorghum over fresh biscuits - now tha's good eating. Sorghum is chock-full of nutrients and, unlike molasses, contains no additives. Photo by Mark Cornelison, staff.



[Sorghum replacement values](#)

If you go

Morgan County Sorghum Festival

When: Sept. 26-28.

Where: Main Street and Old Mill Park, West Liberty.

Call: (606) 743-3330 or (606) 743-2300.